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Editorial Open Access

The Impact of Development on Violent Nature

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Editorial

It is well established that development impacts on disaster outcomes and our coping with extreme and uncertain natural hazards. Evidence includes through data available from the annual Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme and the World Disasters Reports of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC). The data shows that whilst deaths are generally highest in countries with low human development indices, numbers affected are significantly higher in those with medium development indices. Economic damage is highest in those with high development indices. This also indicates how relationships between disaster and development are prone to varying categorisations of human progress and types of crises.

Meanwhile, major ongoing threats are interconnected global concerns. As such, articulation of 'development disaster' is from time to time renewed via global forums expressing objectives of sustainability, such as the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in June, 2012. Uncertain trends in environmental, economic and social systems and rapid onset crises indicate sustainable development and disaster risk reduction to be a common agenda of protecting people and planet. A question is therefore to what extent can we consolidate the disaster and development nexus for new development thinking and actions that truly address ongoing challenges to quality of life and survival?

Part of the learning in disaster and development studies over the last four decades has been to realise how outcomes of major crises are a function not of the violent natures of environmental hazards, but of people being in the wrong place at the wrong time without adequate forms of protection. Often referred to as a vulnerability perspective of disaster, more recent emphasis has been put on human or institutional resilience of individuals, societies, nations and so forth. The key observation of both a vulnerability and a resilience perspective has been that people, by definition the constituent composition of a disaster, are central to altering future outcomes, whether through being more susceptible to change, being more fragile or more resilient. What makes people vulnerable, resilient, healthy, strong, happy, prosperous or most other descriptors is however both a function of contexts and choices, otherwise known as the structural and agentive aspects of being.

Whilst economically poor people may be so because wealthy people made them so through uneven development, a further crucial reality is that all people make choices that put themselves and others at more or less risk of catastrophic human and environmental loss. Understanding a balance between forced and chosen influences on being at risk is a complex field, such that care is required in the analyses of cultures and contexts both highly localised and more global. Despite economic, social, behavioural and environmental differences, villagers in the cyclone belt of the Bay of Bengal, radioactivity displaced people in Japan, those impoverished by oil spills in Nigeria or losing livelihoods in the Gulf of Mexico have in common a need for their rights to disaster reduction to be upheld. In sum, the evidence from case studies of people centred disaster and development interventions is that combinations of political will, behaviour change and knowledge development through appropriate education and technology would secure more sustainable futures.

Beyond recognising the nature of the problem, a second challenge is to identify the mechanisms for implementing the paths to development stability required to attain more controllable disaster risks. Here I suggest two approaches that ultimately also combine – one in which resilience is enhanced to reduce hazard risks and one in which we manage uncertainty. They are referred to separately by way of emphasising that too much of one without the other would be to either invest in the wrong action, or alternatively to improve knowledge but without actions. The efficient and affective route is therefore to reduce human vulnerability in the broad social and economic sense whilst accepting a level of uncertainty about its effects. After all, social and economic improvements reduce human loss and can protect the environment, and knowledge can be detrimental as well as a benefit if limited to inappropriate actions such as in the interests of subjugation, uneven development and further environmental degradation. The combined call for political will, behaviour change and appropriate technology with education therefore points towards in-depth, motivated engagement in disaster and development studies beyond conventions of resilience and uncertainty that we have seen to date.

The next part of the challenge is to identify obstacles to progressing the political will, behaviour change and improved technology and education suggested here. There are likely to be many, with varied reactions to growing crises based on policy rationales developed under varying conditions of disaster certainty and impact. Investment choices both personally and institutionally need to address both short term and long term environmental, economic and social impacts adequately to address underlying vulnerability and development issues, whilst raising moral and political awareness. This means action towards confronting the more unacceptable and unjust risks and a more precautionary approach generally, whether in contexts of climate change, uneven development, economic instability environmental and social impacts. It means using the best of our evidence base to reduce environmental threats in the most inclusive ways possible, to negotiate longer-term adaptations, wellbeing and poverty reduction. It is also to develop accessible knowledge and understanding, opportunities for diplomacy, rights and moralistic persuasion including through the most pro-people political orientations that can offer sustainable development.

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